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**Testimony of
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**Before the Environment Committee
February 19, 2014**

**IN SUPPORT OF: R.B. 70 – AN ACT CONCERNING THE PRESERVATION
OF LANDS UNDER THE PROTECTION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY
AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND THE DEPARTMENT OF
AGRICULTURE.**

Senator Meyer, Representative Gentile and honorable members of the Environment Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today in **strong support** of R.B. 70 *An Act Concerning the Preservation of Lands Under the Protection of the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection and the Department of Agriculture*.

Audubon Connecticut is the state office of the National Audubon Society with more than 10,000 members statewide. We work to protect birds, other wildlife and their habitats through science and conservation, education, and legislative advocacy for the benefit of people and the earth's biological diversity. Through our network of nature education centers, 4,500 acres of protected wildlife sanctuary lands and local, volunteer Chapters, we seek to connect people with nature and inspire the next generation of conservationists.

Connecticut's Natural Assets

Clean air, clean water, scenic vistas, ample opportunities for nature-based education and outdoor recreation and a robust network of habitats that support Connecticut's rich diversity of birds and wildlife – these are some of the benefits provided by state conservation lands. State Parks, State Forests, Wildlife Management Areas, Natural Area Preserves and protected farmland constitute the natural infrastructure of our state. Eight state conservation properties are recognized by Audubon as Important Bird Areas and three of them providing bird habitat of global significance. These properties were acquired through careful consideration, long negotiation, sometimes through the generosity of landowners, always with their patience and usually with an investment of the peoples' dollars. Today, state conservation lands constitute an economic engine generating more the \$2 billion in economic activity and supporting 9,000 jobs statewide. State-protected farmland adds considerably to that economic and resource contribution.

A Question of Trust

For most Connecticut residents, it is a matter of trust that state conservation lands are protected in perpetuity. The experience of recent years, however, has revealed that these taxpayer investments lack necessary legal protections and are subject to a legislative conveyance process that can threaten or eliminate their natural resource

value. A sad result of these experiences is that the public's trust in the state's ability to serve as a faithful steward of its conservation lands has eroded. R.B. 70 puts the state on the road to restoring that trust.

Preserving Our Investment

For more than two years, Audubon Connecticut has been working with partners and with the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection to investigate avenues to strengthen protections for state conservation lands. R.B. 70 will provide a framework for protecting these lands by:

1. Classifying lands under the custody and control of DEEP and DoAg as "land of high conservation value" unless the Commissioners make a written determination to the contrary;
2. Clarifying that it is State policy to preserve these lands and their resource values;
3. Requiring that DEEP and DoAg include a conservation restriction in the deed for lands of high conservation value; and
4. Providing for a more comprehensive and transparent state land conveyance process.

A Constitutional Amendment

Audubon Connecticut strongly endorses the recommendation made by the Connecticut Council on Environmental Quality in their report "Preserved, But Maybe Not" that the state adopt a constitutional amendment similar to those enacted by New York or Massachusetts, both which require a higher level review before state conservation lands can be conveyed and possibly converted to a non-conservation use. We look forward to working with members of the General Assembly to achieve this level of protection for Connecticut's conservation lands, understanding that this is an effort that may require years to achieve.

Taking Action Now

Though a constitutional amendment would provide the highest level of security for state conservation land, state conservation and agricultural lands deserve to be protected now. R.B. 70 provides that essential first step toward ensuring that these lands and the many natural assets they comprise are conserved and protected for future generations. Audubon Connecticut looks forward to working with the Environment Committee, DEEP, the Department of Agriculture and fellow conservation advocates to advance this legislation successfully.

Thank you again for your consideration of this important matter